History of Jewish Philosophy – the Modern Era

By Rabbi Dr Meir Triebitz

Overview

In Tzidkat HaTzadik, Rabbi Tzadok HaCohen of Lublin elaborates a theory of commensurability between Torah knowledge and secular knowledge:

> In each generation, it [the Torah] is a map of the world in that time. This is because the renewal of Jewish souls in every generation serves as the source for the renewal of the entire world at large. [In addition] just as the souls [of the Jewish nation] undergo changes from one generation to the next, so does the Torah. This is particularly true for the Oral Law which undergoes a renewal in every generation by the hands of its scholars. This renewal of the Oral Law, in turn, illuminates the new souls of that time, and this brings about renewal in the world at large. Consequently by reflecting upon the state of the world in each generation, one can understand the state of the Torah as propounded by the scholars of that generation[2].

2 Tzidkat HaTzadik 90

The concept of commensurability was also expressed by Rav Kook in Orot where he says:

> God acted charitably with his world by not placing all creative abilities in one place, one person, one nation, one country, or in one generation. Rather He scattered them. As a consequence perfection can only be achieved through conjunction. "On that day God will be one and His name will be One".
>
> Israel has hidden spiritual resources. However, in order to unite the entire world around them, it is necessary that Israel lack certain creative abilities in order to allow the other nations to participate in universal perfection. This generates a process by which Israel imports ideas from the other nations and infuses them with spirituality[3].

Commensurability for both Rav Tzadok and Rav Kook is not merely a temporal coincidence of ideas, nor of a simple process of import-export. Rather it is an inter and intra dynamical process through which ideas are generated both by the Jewish nation and its scientific-philosophic counterparts by the nations of the world. For Rav Tzadok, the process originates with the Torah scholars in each generation and filters into the secular world. For Rav Kook, the process can also originate in the nations of the world but is then given spiritual expression by Jewish thinkers. This bipolar dynamical process expressed by those two seminal thinkers is very much in contradistinction to a remark made by Julius Guttman:

> The Jewish people are not driven to philosophical thought from its very own, inner power. It received philosophy from outside, and the history of Jewish philosophy is a history of receptions of foreign intellectual goods, which were then of

3 'Yisrael veUmos HaOlam' in Orot (year) Mossad HaRav Kook; Jerusalem p. 152

> course adapted according to its very own, new points of view[4].

Guttman denies any creative role played by Judaism. The appearance of philosophical ideas in Jewish thinkers is merely one of export-import. In addition, according to Guttman, this process is an intentional self-conscious one. As a consequence, it applies only to the rational medieval philosophers and later on to those of the haskalah and onwards who did not necessarily have any deep connections with the traditional Jewish spirituality in texts. According to Rav Tzadok and Rav Kook this process is a natural phenomenology of mind. It is therefore not necessarily intentional or self-conscious.

In this essay, I will explore how the ideas of Rav Tzadok and Rav Kook are manifested in modern (post medieval) traditional Jewish thinkers such as the Arizal, Rav Chaim Volozhener and the Leshem. These no doubt were not people who actively pursued secular scholarship. Nonetheless, their original and innovative systems of thought bear the clear imprint of the evolution of Western philosophy expressed in spiritual language. The spirituality of these concepts inevitably brought these thinkers to different conclusions from that of their Western counterparts. On the contrary, these ideas are developed and, using Rav Kook's words, "infused with spirituality". Through them we can highlight the important theological differences between Judaism and Western thought.

The Difference Between Halacha and Hashkafa

There are two distinct components to Jewish texts and thought. One is legal, known as halacha and the other is philosophical and theological known as hashkafa. There is not always a clear line of delineation between these two. Nonetheless this distinction can be

4 Philosophy of Judaism p. 1, cited in Gordon, P. E. (2005) Rosenzwig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy; University of California Press p. 6.

traced from Scripture, through Mishna and Talmud, to the entire corpus of Jewish writings throughout history.

The difference between these two aspects of Judaism becomes apparent through a study of their historical development.

Halacha operates with the principle of historical continuity. All rulings are built upon those that came before, reinterpreting and modernizing earlier principles. There are also clear historical demarcations of authority; these emerge from clearly defined eras which create a hierarchy of halachic authority and interpretation. This historical, legal hierarchy, in turn, creates a tradition of text, the interpretation of which constitutes the norm of halachic discourse.

Each successive era interprets the previous era but may not contradict it. Hence the Talmud interprets the Mishna, the Rishonim interpret the Talmud and so on until the present. The form of halachic discourse is always interpretive and based on historical textural precedent.

Without tracing the origin of a halacha to its scriptural and/or Talmudic source, its exposition by the medieval authorities (Rishonim) and its further elaboration by the post-medieval authorities (Acharonim), halachic analysis is invariably truncated and incomplete. The very nature of halachic debate and controversy is characterized by differences of opinion in the correct interpretation of earlier texts.

In the realm of hashkafa, however, there is no historical hierarchy. Later Jewish thinkers often reject completely the philosophy of earlier eras. The hermeneutical process of reinterpreting earlier generations simply doesn't exist within Jewish philosophy. For example, Rambam's Guide or R' Saadiah Gaon's Emunos ve-Deos are not primarily works of interpretation of Talmudic passages or Scriptural verses. Though both of these works contain interpretations of Scripture and Talmud, these interpretations are presented as justifications for independent philosophical systems. Similarly the

works of post medieval thinkers such as the Maharal and Arizal are not interpretations of medieval Jewish philosophy, but rather are original systems of thought.

In essence Jewish hashkafic history consists of radical shifts of paradigm. Each theological paradigm makes use of entirely new and independent ideas. This process is similar to the historical advance of science as described by Thomas Kuhn in his Structure of Scientific Revolution. It is therefore clear that hashkafa operates according to a different historical system than halacha[5]. Unlike halacha, hashkafa does not recognize a historical hierarchy of authority.

The key to understanding a work of hashkafa, therefore, is not to seek its historical sources but to look for the theological paradigm within which it was written. In light of Rav Kook's statement above, the paradigm can perhaps be understood within the context of general intellectual history. As a result, the unrelated discontinuities which one sees in Jewish thinking are linked to their counterparts in the world of ideas at large.

The Philosophical Structure of the Arizal's Revolution

There is no greater quantum leap in the history of Jewish thought than that which we find between the Arizal and hjs predecessors. While a wealth of kabbalistic thought is to be found in earlier thinkers such as the Raavad, Yitzchak the Blind, Ramban and the Arizal's own teacher Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, the kabballah of the Arizal represents a radical change in paradigm. Jewish thought was never to be the same. The concepts of tzimtzum (Divine contraction), shevirat hakeilim ('breaking of the vessels' – cosmic implosion) and partzufim (faces of God) created the conceptual framework of almost all later mystical thinkers. The writings of the Arizal are the basic texts upon which the Shlah, the Ramchal, Chassidic masters, Rav Tzaddok and Rav Kook created entire systems of philosophy. The Arizal engineered an entire hermeneutical

5 See R' Soloveitchik's Uvikashtem Misham pp. 205-6.

revolution which radically altered the understanding of scripture and Talmud. Through these new concepts the Arizal removed the opaque nature of the Zohar and revealed its deep insights and meanings.

The general consensus[6] is that the thought of the Arizal severed the medieval dependence of Jewish thought on Greek rationalist philosophy. The Arizal's kabballah purged Jewish thought of secular philosophical language and created a uniquely Jewish system of symbol and metaphor. The Arizal speaks the language of revelation and not that of Plato and Aristotle. The Arizal's kabballah represents a unique revelation in which symbols and objects are not reducible to any Western philosophical system.

While much of the terminology can be found in the Zohar, the Arizal's use of terms and their interpretation in his metaphysical schemes is entirely original. The break of the Arizal with his predecessors can hardly be overestimated.

In is commentary on the Arizal's Etz Chaim the Leshem writes:

> It is well known that the holy Torah expands and is continually revealed at all times. It continuously expands in all levels of interpretation. Nonetheless, there is a major difference between its revealed and hidden parts. Both continuously grow in breadth and depth. The growth in depth is reflected by new Torah novella which are revealed at all times, whereas the growth in breadth is the expansion of explanation which comes after the brevity of earlier generations… In the revealed parts the major part of its expansion is in breadth, for each generation descends in understanding and therefore requires increased explanation and interpretation in order to understand the wisdom of previous generations… However, in the hidden part of the holy Torah, it is different. Its major expansion and resolution

6 See for example Gershom Scholem (1946) Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism Schocken Books; New York p. 851

> is in its depth…. This comes from the increasing illumination and revelation of God's divine light….[7]

The Arizal inaugurated a revolution of Jewish thought and consciousness which continues to leave its mark on all Jewish thinkers.

Descartes

Slightly after the time of the Arizal, another revolution in thought was taking place but this time in Western philosophy. The central figure in this revolution was the French philosopher Renee Descartes. His famous "Cogito ergo sum" summarizes his most important contribution to philosophy which was to create a total break with the Greek thought of Aristotle and Plato that had dominated Western though before him. In his Meditations, Descartes developed a argument from doubt which asserted that nothing can be known about the world with absolute certainty. The only thing that cannot be doubted and thus can be known with absolute certainty is the act of thought itself. Everything else, including the external physical world, is subject to philosophic scepticism. Descartes thereby forged a break between mind and matter which would forever be known as the Cartesian dichotomy. This gave rise to what is referred to in philosophy as the 'mind-body' problem. In consequence, philosophy would never be the same again. Man's relationship with the external physical world around him was forever altered[8].

For Descartes, as well as for many thinkers of the enlightenment, philosophy, science and theology were very much intertwined. Descartes predicated the certainty of thought on the existence of a benevolent God. The mind-body dichotomy of Descartes has

7 Elyashiv, Chidushim U-Biurim page 21 column 2

8 See Richard Rorty (1979) Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature Princeton University Press; New Jersey p. 45-69 for an in depth discussion of this shift in paradigm.

theological implications. This is not explicit in Descartes himself but lies at the basis of his thinking[9]. Descartes makes contradictory statements about God. On one hand, his whole system of scientific knowledge depends upon an assumed knowledge of God:

> The certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of Him.[10]

Conversely, Descartes states explicitly that the idea of God is beyond comprehension. In his Letter to Marsienne 15th April 1630 he writes:

> We cannot comprehend (grasp) the greatness of God, even though we know it[11]

Similarly on 6th May he writes:

> Since God is a cause whose power exceeds the bounds of human understanding and since the necessity of their truths (the eternal truths of mathematics) does not exceed our knowledge, these truths are therefore are something less than, and subject to the incomprehensible power of God.[12]

On 27th May 1630 he writes:

> I say that I know it, not that I conceive or comprehend it, because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful, even though our soul, being finite, cannot comprehend or conceive of Him.[13]

In order to resolve this contradiction it is necessary to turn to the important changes, both scientific and theological which were taking

9 See Cambridge Companion to Descartes (1992) p. 174-199 Cambridge University Press, Cambridge for more detail.
10 Fifth meditation AT VII 71: CSMK 49
11 AT I 145; CSMK 33
12 AT I 110; CSMK 25
13 AT 152; CSK 25

place in the seventeenth century. The advent of exact mathematical methods to describe the physical world at this time led to a change in the conception of God. The mathematical precision associated with the Divine, which had heretofore been restricted to the celestial bodies, was now being used to describe the terrestrial world as well.

For the Greek philosopher, mathematical precision was only realized in the upper, lunar, bodies. The physical world, while subject to general laws of species preservation, nonetheless behaves randomly. The view of Aristotle, as described by Maimonides, (in chapter 17 of section III of the Guide) is that divine providence operates solely in the celestial spheres[14]. Since theoretical knowledge is limited to the non-physical, the medieval God remains transcendent.

The usage of exact mathematical and scientific methods to describe terrestrial movement of bodies allowed Divine properties to infiltrate the physical world. The emergence of theoretical forms within the terrestrial world requires a shift in man's understanding of God. Theoretical knowledge is no longer confined to the spiritual and non-physical domains. Philosophers such as Malbranche, Spinoza and Leibnitz as well as scientists such as Newton, began referring to God in immanent terms. As the world became more Godly, God became more 'worldly'. The God of the medieval theologians, under the influence of Greek philosophy, had always been conceived in transcendental terms. Suddenly, in the enlightenment, God emerged within the terrestrial world.[15]. A central figure in this revolution was Descartes. He advanced the usage of precise mathematical methods

14 In the terrestrial world only man is subject to Divine providence. What man and the celestial spheres have in common is intellect. In the celestial sphere the intellect is expressed by the precision of mathematical movement (see chapter 10 of section II). For man, it is his ability to perceive theoretical knowledge. In fact, the method of intellectualization of man, in actu, is analogous to that of God (chapter 68 of section I), whereby the knower, the object of knowledge and the act of knowing become one.

15 See Funkenstein Theology and the Scientific Imagination Princeton University Press; New Jersey pp 23-97.

to describe the physical world[16]. The statement of Descartes which associates scientific knowledge with knowledge of God is referring to God's immanental aspect. God can be clearly known as He manifests Himself in the world. However knowledge of the world itself is disconnected from man's conscious thought. Since man's conscious thought is also derived from God, we therefore end up with a dichotomy between two gods – the immanent and the transcendent. It is the transcendent God to which Descartes refers when he speaks about His incomprehensibility.

Descartes' "Cogito" presents us with a theology of irreducible dichotomy as well as a philosophical one. On one hand, God is removed from the physical world and embedded in man's conscious. This serves as the source for man's thoughts and intellectual awareness which are also removed form the physical world. On the other hand, the apprehension of precise mathematical laws to describe the physical world require Divine immanence.

The "Cogito" which produced the mind-body dichotomy also produced a dichotomy between transcendence and immanence with respect to God. Ontologically and theologically these are two sides of the same coin.

Arizal and Descartes

The Etz Chaim is a compendium of the Arizal's lectures, as recorded by his closest and foremost student, R' Chaim Vital. It begins with the following passage:

> Regarding God's purpose in the creation of the worlds…
>
> The first investigation is what earlier and later Sages have explored to know the reason for the creation of the world – for what reason was it created at all? Their conclusion was that the reason for [creation] was that as follows: God, may

16 Cambridge Companion to Descartes (1992) Cambridge University Press; Cambridge.

> His Name be blessed, is necessarily perfect in all of His acts and powers, and all of His names of greatness, and virtues and honor. Therefore if He did not bring His actions and powers into action and deed, He could not be called perfect, neither in His actions, names or descriptions…

According to the Arizal, God's attributes can be brought to perfection and completion only through the creation of man. For man is the necessary recipient of Divine justice, love and truth. This seems to imply that God needs man in order to attain perfection. This is, however, a paradoxical statement. For why should God be in need of someone outside of Himself for perfection? Does this not imply that God, in and of Himself, is imperfect and incomplete? If so, how can God still be the perfect Being as understood by Jewish thought?

The resolution of this paradox is that the Arizal establishes an irreducible dichotomy between God, in and of Himself, and God as He is perceived by man. There are two dimensions to God. On one hand, God is a perfect Being, whose perfection and completion cause Him to be unintelligible to man. On the other hand, there is the dimension of God as Creator. God relates to man in such a way that through His acts towards man He achieves greater perfection and completion – from man's viewpoint. This understanding of the Arizal is that of the Ramchal, Nefesh HaChaim, Vilna Gaon and the Leshem.

In other words, the Arizal's answer to the question "Why did God create the world" assumes a God-man dimension which is intelligible to man. This dimension is not describing God Himself, which can never be known, but rather describes God as He relates to man.

In this passage the Arizal introduces an independent God-man dimension which was unknown to medieval Jewish philosophers. Rambam, for example, when discussing the same question of the

purpose of creation[17], concludes simply that creation has no purpose. The world exists precisely because God wills it as such. Lying behind Rambam's conclusion is that man cannot make any claim about God, including His reason for creation. This is a consequence of Rambam's general theory of negative theology which asserts that man cannot make any claim about God.

Therefore the Arizal's answer for the reason of creation represents an important paradigm shift in the way Judaism thought about God.

By introducing an ontological dichotomy in the descriptions of God, the Arizal allows man to speak about God's purpose in creation from man's perspective without intruding on God's absolute otherness. This defines man's purpose and role in the world. In addition, man's intellect can now perceive God's immanence.

The Arizal's revolution in the Jewish concept of God bears strong philosophical affinity to the Cartesian revolution in Western philosophy, as discussed above. We noted that Descartes' dichotomy between mind and body led to two perspectives of God. According to Descartes, God is wholly unknowable, yet at the same time expresses Himself in the world through the precision of the sciences. This Cartesian dichotomy is purely epistemological. It deals only with man's knowledge.

Conversely, the Arizal's dichotomy, while philosophically similar, is primarily ethical. The chief consequence is to allow man to relate directly to God, while preserving the monotheistic idea of God's separateness. This relationship gives man a purpose, in that he perfects God.

Thus the Arizal imbued the Cartesian revolution with an ethical dimension. This is a beautiful example of Rav Kook's principle that "Israel imports ideas from the other nations and infuses them with spirituality".

17 section III chapter 13

Arizal continued: Hume, Kant and Hegel

The Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body only widened in succeeding centuries. Descartes' construction of the rational and scientific truth of the physical world was undermined by the Scottish philosopher David Hume who refuted the claim that scientific law is inherent in the physical world. He claimed that the ephemeral nature of the external world inherently resists any scientific or deterministic structure. As a result, according to him, science's claims of an intelligible natural order were baseless.

Hume's scepticism undermined the entire scientific enterprise. Without inherent natural laws science cannot make any claims or predictions. This crisis was salvaged by the efforts of the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant. Kant did not refute Hume. On the contrary, Kant took Hume's scepticism to its logical end. If, in fact, there is no inherent logical-causal law in nature, then what scientists refer to as natural law must originate in the human mind. The rational ordering of sensory data is a construct of the human intellect. The world itself is unintelligible and unknowable. The structure of man's thought imposes an order upon the physical world. Man's mind apprehends the world in a logical manner. The claims of science are descriptions of the human process of thought and not of the physical world.

The revolution brought about by Kant's philosophy is often referred to as 'Copernican'. This expression was used by the philosopher himself in his preface to the second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason. Whereas Copernicus in his day dislodged man from his vision of himself as standing at the center of the world to that of a bystander, Kant reversed the role.

Man, once again, took his place at the center of the world, but in a radically changed role. The centrality of man, however, was no longer objective but subjective. Man's' central role is that he creates systems of physical law which are a product of his mind, but not inherent in physical reality.

The deficiencies and weaknesses in Kant's philosophy soon became apparent. For one thing, Kant's transfer of scientific law from object to subject led to the question 'Who generates these laws? Is it man, or is it the mind of God acting through him? In addition, the synthetic nature of intellectual apprehension seemed to deny the reality of basic aspects of existence, such as the uniqueness of the individual. In an attempt to resolve these difficulties the nineteenth century German philosopher Hegel invented a new philosophy of reality which not only posited the epistemological reality of the external world, but also saw the relationship between object, subject and idea to be a dialectic process in which each component contributes to a logical process of increasing clarity. The Hegelian syllogism of logic, nature and mind (sometimes known as spirit) is a dialectic process both in reality and in history which teleological closes the gap between the universal the and particular, the physical and the spiritual, the finite and the infinite[18].

This dialectic process is an inherent central theme and idea in the kabballah of the Arizal. In the section in the Etz Chaim called 'Shaar Ha'Akudim' 'the Gate of Constraints', the Arizal describes a sophisticated and complex process of dialectics which he called expansion (hispashtut) and contraction (histalkut). These two movements interact with each other to create a world which serves as a receptacle for God's infinite Divine light. Through succeeding expansion and contraction a medium is created which resolves the opposition between the infinite and finite, God and the world. It is this process which allows the physical world to incorporate spirituality. The Arizal's system allows for the co-existence of Divine transcendence and immanence, thereby unifying the gap between God and the world, and God and man.

In the Arizal's Kabballah spiritual acts of God are described as supernal lights. These lights first emerge from the highest spiritual

[18] See discussion in Stern, R. (1990) Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object Routledge, London and New York chapters 1-2.

world, Adam Kadmon, and create the first vessels which are called the world of Akudim. Akudim is a world in which these lights are bound by spiritual vessels. The Arizal describes the very intricate process which leads to the formulation of the vessels of Akudim. The process is governed by two types of movement: expansion (hispashtut) and contraction (histalkut). These primal lights first emerge then immediately ascend, returning to their source. This movement of expansion and contraction, appearance and disappearance, results in the creation of imprints.

Through this process the Arizal defines three types of lights: 1) the initially emergent light called the "straight light" which moves forward. 2) a light which is produced by the ascending lights called the "returning light". 3) the imprint made by the initial light before its return, which is also called a "straight light". These three types of light correspond to the kabbalistic concepts of chesed (unconditional love and mercy), din (strict justice) and rachamim (mercy).

Chesed and din are two opposites. Chesed, as expansion, is the unbridled light illuminated by the Creator which expresses His infinite love and desire for goodness. Din, as contraction, is essentially a process of negation by which God's infinite love and desire are arrested creating boundaries and limitations. While chesed is a gushing forth of spirituality, din is the constraint of physicality. When the supernal lights emerge as "straight light" they turn toward the creation. When they ascend again, they turn their backs to creation. Chesed is an act of approaching while din is an act of turning away. The "returning light" which originates in the supernal lights which ascend in order to reunite with their Creator illuminates the imprint of "straight" light. This produces a collision between the two types of light: "straight" and "returning".

This collision creates rachamim which is different combinations of chesed and din. From this collision emerges the first vessels which serve as receptacles of the Divine Light and thereby allow for a relationship between the Creator and the creation.

The Interpretation of the Leshem

In his commentary on the Etz Chaim the Leshem writes in the beginning of Shaar HaAkudim:

> "It was the will of the Divine Creator that all aspects of reality should be united. This is because every aspect of reality is in need of every other aspect for its basic existence. In addition every aspect serves each other aspect continually and thereby achieves perfection. This whole process comes about through man's acts when he acts according to the Divine holiness of the Torah and commandments. Man's spiritualization of the world can only be accomplished through this underlying natural unity.[19]

This passage of the Leshem expresses the underlying philosophical ideas of the world of Akudim. The three central components are 1) the external world; 2) man and 3) the Divine Torah. Judaism constitutes a tripartite system which links God, man and the natural world. In addition, the natural world has an underlying unity which is made use of by man. This unity will achieve its spiritual completion only if man acts in accordance with the mandates of the Torah. Man raises the world from its natural unity to a higher spiritual unity.

How does man raise the world to its higher spiritual unity? In the above passage the Leshem provides the following explanation: He first asserts that the myriad components of the natural world are interrelated and interdependent. He then states that this unity is actualized only through man.

What is unique about man such that he is capable of utilizing natural unity to create spiritual unity? It seems to me that man's uniqueness is his ability to think. The essence of thought is to disclose the underlying unity of all beings in the world. Through thought man formulates the fundamental laws and concepts which bind disparate

19 Leshem; Chidushim u-Biurim 12: 6

objects together and thereby brings intellectual unity to the external world. However, according to Judaism, thought is not only a pure intellectual activity. By giving man the power of thought, God has empower him, allowing him to fulfil the Divine mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it"[20].

In addition, every thing in the world is defined by its use for man. For "each thing receives the will of man as its substantial end, its definition and soul, for it has no end in itself"[21]. The essence of each thing is determined by its usability in the service of a specific need This enables man to see the sameness of different things through their common usage and service of need. This process of abstraction from the particular to the universal, allows thinking man to attain knowledge of the the Being of things which is God.

The Vilna Gaon explans[22] that the inherent order and unity which lies within the objects of the external world is the imprint, reshimu, created by the illumination of God's light. This reshimu reveals a little of the wisdom with which G-d created the world and left to man in order to develop and cultivate it and thereby make use of it.

However, the act of thought through which man perceives logic and order in the world is always accompanied by a simultaneous equal act of negation. For the essence of abstraction is to go beyond the pure irreducibility physicality of objects in order to ascertain their abstract content. Through abstraction man leaves the particular in favor of the general. Thought, therefore, is inherently an act of negation for it does away with the particularism of objects in the world in attaining knowledge of their underlying unity.

The irreducibilty of the external world constitutes the notion of din which emphasises multiplicity and variability in contradistinction to

20 Bereishit 1:28
21 Leshem ibid.
22 Avivi, Y. (ed) (1993) Asarah Klalim (Hebrew) Kerem Eliyahu, Jerusalem chapter 4 pp131-133

inherent unity. This din is in ultimately incomprehensible to man. This is the meaning of the statement of the Sages that "God thought to create the world with din but saw that it would not be able to sustain itself"[23]. Din represents the unfathomable irreducible existence of the world which can only be known in the thought of God. Man's thought, however, is finite and can only understand unity. Hence the reshimu and the "returning light" which clash in the world of Akudim.

These dual aspects of thought, unification and negation, are the basis of Hegel's philosophy of mind. In his Logic he writes that the pure thought of the being of things in abstraction from all further determination, is the thought of "the pure nothing… perfect emptiness… or rather empty imitation of thought itself"[24].

The Creation of the Vessels: Hegel vs. Arizal

The clash between the two lights of chesed and din results in the creation of the first vessel. The purpose of this vessel is to contain the original illumination of light. After this there is a second expansion which does not leave an impression, a reshimu, like the first, but its external dimension accommodates itself perfectly in the first vessel. This second dichotomy of chesed and din which is an expression of the dichotomy from the human subject and external object is now be mediated through this vessel.

It would appear that this is analogous to Hegel's third syllogism in his Encyclopaedia – The Philosophy of Mind. There, the dialectic of nature and logic are mediated by mind, or spirit. The tripartite of nature, logic and spirit was, for Hegel, the phenomenology of the mind which brings man to God and transcendence.

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23 Quoted Rashi, Bereishis 1: 1

24 vol. I: part 3. see chapter 10 in Stanley Rosen (1974) C.W.F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom Yale University Press, New Haven Conn.

It is however at this point that Hegel and the Arizal take different paths. Hegel called his philosophy the final philosophy, whereas for the Arizal, it was only the beginning. Hegelian philosophy is primarily Christian in nature – it is based upon the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost[25]. The Arizal's kabbalah, conversely, is an expression of the inevitable self-destruction of Christianity, and the triumph of Yaakov over Esav.

This is expressed by the fact that the process of Akudim eventually leads to a breaking of the vessels. For Hegel the collision brings to synthesis which he viewed as the perfection of the Trinity. For the Arizal the collision leads to the destruction of the breaking of the vessels.

The Trinity was the paradigm for Hegel for bridging the separation between subject and object. The philosophical significance of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is that the Father 'poses' the world and is reflected with its essence as the Son. This separation between subject and object, Father and Son, is overcome within the Spirit or Holy Ghost. The 'reunion' of Father and Son within the Holy Ghost is the paradigmatic expression of the reunion of subject and object which takes place by the manifestation of 'Absolute Spirit'.

For the Ari the dichotomy between the straight light of chesed and the returning light of din finds its resolution in the containment of light within vessels. The Leshem also understood this as the union of nature and thought.

However, for Hegel, this union, achieves completion which was his vision of Christianity. According to the Arizal the successful containment of light within the vessels can never be completed in this world. The vessels eventually break, their pieces falling into the worlds of physicality and spiritual alienation. The spiritual goal of the Christian Trinity, according to Judaism, is fundamentally flawed and doomed to self-destruction. Even in Atzilus, where God and His

25 See Rosen Hegel

creations are united, synthesis is unattainable. The "breaking of the vessels" – Sheviras Hakeilim – represents the authentic Jewish refutation of Christianity as expounded by the most overarching philosopher of the 19th century – Hegel. This is the Leshem's interpretation of the Arizal's Shaar HaAkudim. We see clearly that the Leshem's ideas are addressing the phenomenology of mind of the nineteenth century.

The Copernican Revolution and the Nefesh HaChaim

Modernity's conception of man began in the sixteenth century with Copernicus' discovery of the heliocentric nature of the solar system. All earlier Western philosophies and theologies were based on the fact that man occupies the central role in the Divine cosmic plan and providence. The new cosmology called this fundamental belief into question and plunged man into a theological crisis from which he has still not entirely emerged. Moreover, the "Copernican system became one of the strongest instruments of that philosophical agnosticism and skepticism which developed in the sixteenth century"[26].

The solution to this crisis has an entire history, beginning with the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno and developed by such thinkers as Galileo, Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza[27]. The central idea is that despite his physical insignificance, the infinite power of man's intellect suffices to encompass the universe conceptually. Man's central role in creation is thereby reaffirmed, for his mind can elucidate the mathematical structure underlying the entirety of the natural world. These theories, however, are not necessarily theologies and as a result their religious connotations were eventually

26 Montaigne Essais II chapter xii, Hazlitt, works of Michael de Montaigne p. 205

27 See Ernst Cassirer (1944) An essay on Man Yale University Press; Conneticut pp. 29-34.

abandoned, leaving man's intellectual legacy with scientific theories where God does not play any role[28].

In Jewish thought, the turn of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of an entirely new theology of the relationship of man to God and the world. This theology is worked out explicitly in the major work Nefesh HaChaim of Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner. There the author presents an entirely new concept of man and the reaches of his metaphysical and intellectual powers which, in essence, provides the theological answer to the Copernican challenge. In bold new interpretations of both Midrash (God looked at the Torah and created the world) and Zohar (Israel, God and the Torah are one), Rabbi Chaim conceives of a Torah which, on one hand, is ontologically prior to all of creation, but on the other hand, is within man's intellectual ability not only to comprehend but to creatively interpret. Basing himself on a Gemarah in Gittin 6b where Elijah the prophet reveals to two Talmudic sages, Rabbi Yonatan and Rabbi Evyatar, that God is repeating after them a dispute in the exegesis of a certain verse, Rabbi Chaim makes the bold claim that man's study of Torah is not ontologically posterior to God's relationship to the world. Through Torah study man affects the physical and spiritual cosmos with Divine-like powers.

The power of Rabbi Chaim's philosophy goes further than Descartes and Leibniz for man's infinitude is not limited to sheer knowledge. Man's ability to explicate and interpret the Torah and consequently act upon it also has cosmic repercussions. Ultimately man is the living force of all of the physical and spiritual worlds and in this sense, literally imitates God, imitatio Dei. This is Rabbi Chaim's understanding of the Torah when it says that man was created "in the image of God".

28 see Funkenstein (1986) Theology and the Scientific Imagination Princeton University Press; New Jersey p. 116.

Though Rabbi Chaim's philosophy is akin to that of Kant, being that it posits a transcendental, namely the Torah, through which man understands the world, it actually goes further. For Kant, the world in and of itself is unknown and man makes use of his own conceptual scheme in organizing and interpreting the natural data with which he is presented. As such, Kant posited a radical dichotomy between subject and object whereby all of man's efforts have affect only in the subject without any relationship to the object. The attribution of a human effect on the object itself was the starting point for Hegel's critique of Kant and his own phenomenology, which is endowed with spiritual notions of immanence contrary to the anti idolatrous stand of Jewish philosophy.

The philosophy of Rav Chaim, in contrast, created a methodology by which man incorporates the world in itself in a process which leads to greater intellectual and ethical perfection.

Conclusion

This article has traced the development and evolution of modern Western thought from traditional Jewish texts, beginning with the modern era. We have seen that the history of modern Jewish thought, commencing with the Arizal in the sixteenth century, provides us with a "map", to borrow Rav Tzadok's term, of intellectual history which commences with Descartes and continues to Kant and Hegel. In contrast to intellectual historians such as Guttman, we have also seen that this exchange is not one of conscious import but is one by which abstract ideas are given spiritual content and direction. As a consequence a deep bifurcation emerges between Western religious thinkers, who are deeply influenced by Christian theology, and their Jewish counterparts.